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Won't somebody please think of the children? Or, *South Park* fanfic and the political realm

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Comedy Central's *South Park* has proved a bone of contention for traditional guardians of youth culture. From the denunciations of pressure groups on one hand, to academics attempting to claim *South Park* for various political positions on the other, it is ironic that a show addressing the failure of official pedagogy has had so little attention paid to its young fans. Academics argue over the 'message' of *South Park*, in a socio-political sense, or denounce it for irresponsibly embracing post-political cynicism. Yet as Mendes et al. have argued, to draw a false division between youth entertainment and some pre-conceived notion of the political realm is a fallacy: young people's engagement with and meaning-making practices derived from popular culture *are* political in themselves. This paper uses a politically informed conception of discourse analysis developed from Laclau and Mouffe to code the top-rated *South Park* fanfics from Fanfiction.net, a site whose primary demographic is teenagers, in pursuit of the messages young people perceive and make of the show. This project prefers concrete data over impressionistic views of 'young people', and attends to what teenage fans make of and do with the text, rather than imagining them as passive consumers absorbing inherent messages.

Keywords: Attitudes; Media; Politics; Leisure; Identity

Introduction

Popular cultural and academic responses to Comedy Central's *South Park* share an ironic oversight. Despite addressing a show which most agree satirizes the failure of traditional cultural and educational institutions (Becker 2008; Rennie 2008), critics have been quick to pronounce on the nature of inherent meanings and messages in the show and infer an effect on young people. While the Christian Family Network (n.d.) prepared an educational guide on how to 'protect our youth from vile trash like *South Park*', academic writers warn that 'what *South Park* trains its audience to do through this satire of corny morals is to rebuff sentiment and empathy' (Halsall 2008). Even academics who avoid moral consternation on behalf of a vulnerable audience tend to fall into an essentialist fallacy, arguing as though there were an inherent moral/political message to the text which the audience simply receives, whether in service of a liberal, tolerant, progressive agenda associated with the US Democratic Party or a morally and socially conservative one associated with American Republicanism. Cultural studies has

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deconstructed this kind of essentialist fallacy from its outset, beginning with Hall and Morley's early work on variable decoding models (Hall [1973] 1980; Morley 1980). Fan studies has taken this further, tending to see meaning as negotiated between reader, text and fan community, and moreover, has considered the ways that transformative work change and reinforce textual meanings (Jenkins 1992, 2006). In short, a more satisfactory study on the 'meaning' of *South Park* to young people needs to take into account how young people perceive, contest, take up, transform and affirm those meanings. The meaning of the show is not accessible in some locked box of text to which commentators and critics have access.

From a fan studies perspective, this article offers a first step towards redeeming the situation. After reviewing the work on *South Park* and its 'meanings' at present, the discursive analytical tools of Laclau and Mouffe will be adapted to demonstrate that, far from passively received, the perceived 'meanings' of *South Park* are self-consciously taken up, contested, and affirmed and transformed by its young viewers through the medium of fanfiction, i.e., the creation and sharing of unauthorized fiction concerning characters established in a media franchise. Laclau and Mouffe provide appropriate tools for this particular textual study due to their perceptions of meaning in negotiation. As Phillips and Jorgensen puts it:

> The overall idea of [Laclau and Mouffe's] discourse theory is that social phenomena are never finished or total. Meaning can never be ultimately fixed and this opens up the way for constant social struggles about definitions of society and identity […] The discourse analyst's task is to plot the course of these struggles to fix meaning at all levels of the social. (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002, 24)

Because fanfiction is a hierarchical practice, wherein some authors and stories rise to prominence and applause and others are met with indifference or rejection, I found this conception of a struggle to establish meanings that is never closed or finished very useful. Moreover, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that 'a discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points […]. A nodal point is a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered' (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002, 26). As I coded fanfiction, the existence of these privileged signifiers became clearer, and they tended to by nodes infused with political significance. I mean here politics in the small-p sense, as explored by Mouffe (2005, and see below). Contrary to the concerns of academic critics, party politics and ideologies were absent from the discursive struggle. This accords with Mendes, Carter and Davies' argument that:

> although many children are already engaged in a wide range of collective projects […] adults often fail to view these activities as 'political' or constituting children as 'politically engaged' since they rarely connect to a more traditional (party-based) notion of politics. A claim sometimes made is that children are more interested in being passively entertained than in being politically active. In our view, this is an assumption that clearly needs sustained interrogation. After all, politics and entertainment are not necessarily mutually exclusive. (2010, 451)

This study shows in concrete ways how, far from passive reception, young fans do use popular culture to engage in the political realm, once 'the political' is sufficiently understood. First, I will review popular and academic understandings of the detrimental effects the show supposedly has on youth. Then I will introduce the theoretical

background and methodology of the analysis, explaining how 'the political' can be expanded from the limiting definitions just encountered. I will then proceed with a critical discourse analysis of the top-rated fanfics, and conclude with a summary of findings.

Reception of *South Park* by cultural and academic critics

The response from traditional guardians of popular culture to *South Park* has been largely negative. Several right-wing pressure groups took a concerned stance shortly after the show's inception. Focus on the Family spokesman Bob Smithouser called it 'deplorable' (Weinstock 2008), whilst the Christian Family Network (n.d.) announced an agenda to 'protect our youth from vile trash like *South Park*', and claimed their efforts to 'restore morality, and protect life for the individual, family, and community' would be jeopardized by children viewing the show. The conservative advocacy groups Parents Television Council and Action for Children's Television have also condemned *South Park*, with the latter's spokesperson claiming that it is 'dangerous to democracy' (Weinstock 2008; Becker 2008). The concerns are all much alike: obscene language, crude and sexual humour, assaults on traditional institutions, and the fear that the cartoon format will appeal to impressionable children. There are also popular critics who defend the show's critical satire, but these take the form of apologia, acknowledging the default wisdom that *South Park* is bad for children then deconstructing that to an extent. As journalist Barry Fagin opens:

> I confess: I let my kids watch *South Park*. … not every episode mind you. I prescreen them on video before I watch them with the family. But when my face lands on the cover of Negligent Father magazine, that will be the headline: 'He Lets His Kids Watch *South Park*'. (2000)

Popular culture defenders argue for moral content in *South Park* via its scepticism and topical critique. Academic work continues and deepens this, whilst also sometimes defending the crudeness and obscenity to which cultural gatekeepers object. The use and/or necessity of shock value in cultural critique is argued via appeals to Bakhtin (Pike 2009) or Socrates, whom, as Young (2013) reminds us, was considered enough of a threat to the youth and to civility to warrant state execution.

Other academic critics argue for a clear message or moral to *South Park* that slides into capital-P politics: that is, politics in the party sense. For Johnston and McAvoy, it is a right-wing show with conservative messages. Though episodes tend to stage a contest of opinions or values:

> [In *South Park*,] contests still demand [to be put] right through conclusions which appeal to commonsense, perfection, normativity, and even political conservativism [so that] setting things right within this socio-political environment always means setting things to the political right. (2009)

Indeed, their effect of a contest is merely a show, for

> the knowledge [the protagonist] receives is a normative position to which he always already ascribes: in various episodes, these one-sided, learned lessons include the conclusions that environmentalism is a waste ('Rainforest Shmainforest', *Sound Park* 1999); interest in animal rights makes one a 'giant pussy' ('Fun with Veal', *Sound Park* 2002); affirmative

> action ('Goobacks', *Sound Park* 2004), hate crime legislation ('Cartman's Silly Hate Crime 2000', *Sound Park* 2000) [etc] are unnecessary. (2009)

The authors commit a common fallacy here: they conflate the message (that they read as) received by the protagonist as also received, passively, by the viewer. Conversely, Armstrong (2009) cherry picks the episode 'Cherokee Hair Tampons' as an 'attack [on] capitalism and its associated ills and excesses' and a 'social critique of consumer-driven American culture'. The academics who view *South Park* as conveying a particular political message all fall victim to an essentialist fallacy concerning meaning. Moreover, those who view it as problematically apolitical or cynical repeat the error with an element of moral panic not so dissimilar from the popular cultural critics quoted above. Consider the warnings of Groening:

> The salience of *South Park* for analyzing what has been called the postideological era lies in its satirical mode. The program ridicules a range of topical social issues in a manner approaching ideological critique that does not complete the process of critique. Cynicism, which has become the preeminent aspect of the postideological era, is marked by such half measures […] For those with whom *South Park*'s brand of parodic social satire resonates, the appeal of the cynical attitude lies in adopting a position of safety and avoiding the tremendous obligations of ideology. (Groening 2008)

The danger to the youth here is the inculcation of lassitude and apathy. Halsall perhaps epitomizes this view, locating the danger primarily in a supposed lack of empathic protagonists: 'not a single character in *South Park* elicits a complicated emotional reaction from the viewer', she argues, claiming that 'Parker and Stone actively discourage the perception of their figures as anything but generic types', as though the intentions of the creators were (1) unproblematically discernible in the text and (2) the primary factor governing audience interpretation. Halsall concludes that 'fundamentally, what *South Park* trains its audience to do through this satire of corny morals is to rebuff sentiment and empathy' (Halsall 2008, see also Chanda 1998). Both Halsall and Chanda consider the show's crude animation a strong barrier to empathy. In fact, researchers have found that the generation of empathy for fictional characters is dependent on multiple factors including audience perspective and experience, and anti/realism is not necessarily significant (see Hall et al. 2004, Paiva et al. 2004).

Ironically, though almost all critics praise or protest the show's critique of social institutions and traditional education via its child protagonists, none have been self-reflexive enough to put their own institutional prejudices aside and investigate what young people themselves are making of and doing with *South Park.* James Rennie has come closest, noting that:

> Television can be incredibly effective at encouraging young people to think critically about the complexity of moral issues, but only when it recognizes the ethical maturity of its audience. *South Park*'s greatest strength is that it refuses to treat young people like children. (Rennie 2008)

The question then is why should we academics continue to do so? The following project takes a first step towards rectifying this piece of institutional blindness via a study of young fans creative work with and around the show.

Fanfiction, youth and the political

Most work on fanfiction and youth has been conducted in the context of education. Henry Jenkins (2006), a founding theorist of fan studies, stresses the educational potential of fanfiction for teenagers, who are creatively utilizing 'affinity spaces' useful to the types of work and learning they will need as adults in the present economy (169–177). This potential of fan fiction as training in new literacy is increasingly noted by education researchers, teachers and librarians (Chandler-Olcott and Mahar 2003; Mackey and McClay 2008; Kell 2009; Andersen 2010; Eleá 2012). The most prolific writer on this topic is Rebecca Black, whose *Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction* (2008) comes endorsed by Jenkins. Black has also moved the discussion on to fanfiction as an arena of identity politics. She explores the use made of fan fiction by English second-language learners, both in improving their Standard English and incorporating their multicultural knowledge and experiences to forge empowering transnational identities and friendship networks (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009). She demonstrates how a young writer can utilize the codes, Internet environment and conventions of fan fiction, including the solicitation and management of reader feedback, 'to design an effective learning environment that meets her needs as an E[nglish]L[anguage]L[earner] and enables her to achieve the online identity of a successful writer' (2008, 117). Black's focus is accordingly on author's notes and profiles; but this article addressing the stories themselves demonstrate that fanfic partakes in political struggle, as defined by Chantal Mouffe (2005). 'The political' here, does not refer to Party politics, or the establishment of policy, but the discursive struggle for identification of social groups and the construction of an Other or out-group against which one is defined. These struggles can be antagonistic and stringently hierarchical, constructing the Other as enemy; but (and here Mouffe parts way with her grounding in the problematic theories of Carl Schmidt) they need not be. There are forms of we/they relation other than hostility and forms of pluralism other than antagonism, and this, Mouffe argues, is what healthy democracy requires.

Methodology

Discursive-analytic tools from Laclau and Mouffe were applied to the 10 highest rated *South Park* fanfics on the website Fanfiction.net. Fanfiction, or fanfic, is the creative practice of inventing and sharing stories based on established characters and settings (Jenkins 1992). It exhibits the practice of meaning in negotiation, demonstrating interpretation and creative development: meaning resides not merely in what fans perceive in *South Park*, but what they make of it. This is a crucial point previous critics have missed. The reason I have chosen Fanfiction.net as the site of investigation is its demographic: researchers have found that it is primarily used by teenagers, and indeed, the many references to school and parents in reviews and authors' notes confirms this. The top 10 most popular stories in the *South Park* category appear in Table 1. These were the top 10 most-favourited stories as of 15 August 2014. Their publication dates range from 2006 to 2010, thus we can safely infer that they have established a strong influence over the negotiation and stabilization of meanings on *South Park* fandom. Note that, even excluding reviews, we are collectively dealing with over a million words of fanfiction, written either in first person or free indirect discourse. This in itself is strong evidence against academic claims that *South Park* is not conducive to empathy (which by the end of this paper will be shown as demonstrably false, when attention is paid to the words of

Table 1. 10 most-reviewed stories from the *South Park* category on Fanfiction.net.

Title	Author	Faves	Reviews	Words
Kyle in Chains	DanniDinmont	659	960	185,687
I Feel So …	Brat-Child3	648	943	92,955
Life is Better Under a Totalitarian Regime	Seaouryou	568	312	26,640
Second Chance	xichxliebexdichx	492	600	118,376
Psychic BS		485	272	54,484
The Adventures of Taco Man and Robo Inferno	damn expensive eggs	473	349	33,188
Lex Talionis	Foodstamp	441	305	71,256
Aisle Ten	Qindarka		386	187,973
Short Stories with Tragic Endings	Faery Goddyss	437	803	276,896
The journal of One Kenny McCormick		429	415	28,186
				1,075,641

young viewers themselves). Further, every single story in the table aged the characters at least to adolescence, and in the case of *Lex Talionis* to adults. This in itself is interesting, suggesting that the empathy and identification felt by the young authors is more for characters their own age than the nominally pre-teen protagonists, and reflects the fact that the characters canonically speak and behave much more like teenagers than younger children. As I coded the fics, I found that as Laclau and Mouffe predict, struggles over meaning consolidated around nodal signifiers. Key nodal signifiers were:

(1) Parents and peers
(2) Sexuality
(3) Education
(4) Gender

Other institutions, such as the church and the police force, were present but less prominent nodes of struggle. What should be clear is that, though party Politics is absent, the meanings in contest are set firmly within 'the political' realm, already giving the lie to arguments that *South Park* viewing inculcates apathy.

As I have argued elsewhere (Fathallah 2013, 113–116), fan studies scholars have an ethical obligation to make a good-faith attempt to contact authors for permission before quoting their work in academic publications. Fans believe they are writing to and for a specific audience in a specific social context, and whilst it could be claimed that legally online text is public domain, academic ethics should account for experience and cultural context as well as law. In my experience, most fans expect and appreciate requests for permission to quote their work to a new audience. To ignore this expectation is appropriative and may well compromise the researcher's reputation in future work. Therefore, the quoted fans have been messaged via the Fanfiction.net site facility, and wherever a response has been forthcoming, permission to quote has been ascertained, and the quoted fan offered the chance to view the article and voice any concerns pre-publication. For ease of reading, typos and minor spelling and grammatical errors have been corrected.

Findings

First, it should be noted that struggle occurs over the degree to which *South Park* characters are or are not realistic and easy to empathize with. One reviewer states of the fic *Aisle 10:* 'The characters are REAL, but in that SouthParky kinda way that makes me LOVE SouthPark' (queenfemme 2011). The negotiation of meaning here is quite complex, as the characters are claimed to be realistic and empathetic, *but* remain true to a particular mode ('that SouthParky kinda way') that inflects those properties with caveat. Others locate the realism of characters more in the work of fanfiction and its retroactive work on the text. Consider cookiemunster's comment:

> One of the best things about this fanfiction is how you manage to make it believable beyond the bounds of an animated cartoon, like turning secondary characters like Token and Craig into real characters. (cookiemunster 2007)

This would suggest that the characters are perceived in the show are *not* particularly empathetic, and, as Chanda and Halsall suggest, the crude animation acts to 'bound' or limit empathy. However, fanfic has the capacity to alter this. Compare the reviewer who reflects:

> I think *South Park* has such good fanfiction because it has such a diverse set of characters, it's so easy to give them personality and make them meaningful in their own special way. (honeybee137 2014)

Reviewer Ishib ioay (2010) articulates the two-way process of meaning-making very specifically, in a review of the fic *Lex Talionis. Lex Talionis* is unusual in *South Park* fandom in that it is not at all comedic, but deals with the horror wrought on various members of the small town by an adult Eric Cartman, whose canonical amorality and disregard for others has developed into full-blown psychopathy. Ishib ioay responds:

> I've always had problems reading *South Park* fanfictions because I never could take the characters seriously, and thus neither the plot. But after reading your story, I now find myself unable to watch the show without TAKING it seriously. (2010, caps in original)

Fic projects meaning and empathy *back into* the show, whose characters are discussed in real-word terms. Realistic characters are available for shared identification, either with or against. Reviewer Cissa DeLancome (2008a) notes that the author 'give[s] [Cartman] credit for being the cold, manipulative, and intelligent person he is, despite his sick perversion'. Notice the modal verb 'is'. BlackRoseMuffin (2009) observes that she could 'imagine [Cartman] doing everything he does in this fic', referring to the character's perceived objective existence outside this particular story. There are a handful of negative reviews, finding the story excessively melodramatic, but discursive struggle is dominated by the consensus that author Foodstamp has created a realistic depiction of the horrors which a narcissist like Cartman could inflict on a community, drawing frequent expressions of empathy from the readers. Moreover, that perception is now transferred *back onto* the programme, where the young Cartman is frequently seen to manipulate and harm others, generating moral and emotional judgement on behalf of the young fans. Such people are judged to be outside an acceptable 'us' identity, and harmful to the social

body. Other discursive struggles were even more explicitly political, and these nodes will be discussed in turn.

Parents and peers

As a range of critics have observed, parents in *South Park* tend to be portrayed as ineffective at best and sadistic at worst, prone to mass hysteria and helplessly subject to all kinds of propaganda and moral panic (Weinstock 2008; Halsall 2008). For the most part, this construction is solidified in the fanfic. Seaouryou attributes the following reflection to Kenny in *The Journal of One Kenny McCormick*:

> Whenever Mom and Dad disappear for a few days it's usually because they're in prison, or doing something that could get them sent to prison. In either case it's better not to ask. (2006a)

In the show, Kenny is very rarely given intelligible speech, his most notable characteristics being (1) poverty and (2) the mysterious ability to die and reincarnate almost daily without anyone else noticing. The fact that Seaouryou and other authors choose to write whole epics from his perspective demonstrates again that this is sufficient to generate a degree of identification. In fanfic, the consequences to children of their parents; behaviour is emphasized and developed. For instance, in canon, the unfortunate Butters' parents routinely abuse him actively and by negligence, grounding him for illogical reasons, beating him, and once, temporarily selling him as a pet to Paris Hilton. In the show, no one seems to care or particularly notice, but in *Kyle in Chains*, Danni Dinmont has Kyle observe:

> Butters' dad is such a fucking prick. The way he treats his son is a disgrace. My mom has always been fairly strict, but at least there's some level of method to her madness. Mr Stotch's punishments for Butters' 'bad behaviour' have always been on the borderline of child abuse in my book. (2008)

Similarly, in *Psychic BS*, Stan judges them to be 'sick weirdos', and is 'angrier by the moment' upon hearing of their more recent punishments (Brat-Child3 2006a). Likewise, in *Second Chance*, Craig's father is openly abusive. Parents are constructed here as a threatening other against teenage identification – yet this is in struggle. Pulling against that construction, parents are sometimes depicted as loving and accepting: Kyle's father accepts his sexuality in *Kyle in Chains* despite his mother's objection, and Clyde is a self-confessed 'momma's boy' in *The Adventures of Taco Man* (damn expensive eggs 2010), but parents are rarely constructed as helpful in assisting children navigate adolescence. In *Short Stories*, Randy Marsh advices Stan to act first and think later, on the rather tenuous grounds that 'sitting around thinking is what chicks do' (Faery Goddyss 2006). Stan reflects that whilst he loves his father, he probably should not take his advice. Reviewers express affection for this bit of ineffective parenting and consider it true to his canonical portrayal:

> I think you had Randy's character bang-on. I can just imagine his awkward, blinking silences and general slowness. That's just him! (Lilchicky004 2007).

> But oh, I love the little Randy segment. I love Randy so much. And how he's just 'Um, shit got awkward, so uh, yeah … i'ma go'. (Ren85 2008)

In terms of help and advice, siblings and friends are constructed as infinitely more reliable. At the outset of *I Feel So*, Kyle reflects that his best friend Stan is his role model, for he 'admire[s] Stan far too much to want to be anything like [his] dad'. In *Aisle 10*, as Craig begins to navigate his first relationship, his canonical friend Token Black[1] explicitly casts the friendship group in a parental role:

> 'Think of it like this,' Token said. 'It's like we have a little five-year-old. This shy quiet moody little five-year-old and it's his first day of kindergarten and we're scared to send him out on his own. But he's gotta do it, right, he's gotta start somewhere'. (Qindarka 2010)

Moreover, in *Short Stories*, Faery Goddyss gives Bebe what might be the consolidating articulation of this discursive node:

> 'Why do you think Stan relies so heavily on his friends Bebe?' She finally speaks up, asking me a question rather than giving me a statement on what I should do. I pause for a moment before answering, 'For the same reason we all do. Our parents have always been incompetent and irrational. They weren't the most reliable people when we were kids so we turned to each other'. (2006)

Reviewer AdiKo-Bentsy (2010) appreciates 'the way [the author] made Stan, like his friends are more important to him than anything else, because I can relate to that so much'. Indeed, the affirmation of peers over parents continues consistently into the review section. Friends and siblings are involved in the act of reading the fic, which is hidden from parents. Cissa DeLancome (2008b) admits she is 'a naughty girl reading gay fiction in the dark of the night when my parents are sleeping upstairs'. Conversely, K. J. Pitre (2008) informs the author she is 'reading to my friend. He's sitting on the end of the bed', and hyoriii (2010) admits, s/he literally spammed all my friends' with enthusiasm for a story. Reception happens in an interpretative community that excludes parents but includes peers. Interestingly, though, the rejection of parental guidance is not necessarily constructed as a teenage act of aggressive rebellion, but an acknowledgement that parents operate in a rather different world, with limited and rather useless insight into the lives of teens. Clearly, this is a significant political statement.

Sexuality

Sexuality is the second node around which discourse struggles condense. This might seem surprising given that the *South Park* protagonists are canonically children, but as noted above, every single story in the top rated table aged the characters at least to teenagers, and in one case (*Lex Talionis*) to adults. The term 'gay' is a crucial and extremely flexible signifier, and a good example of the struggle for identification in the political realm. For 'gay' *can* refer to homosexuality or a homosexual identity, but frequently denotes something else entirely. It is typically mildly pejorative, and denotes an action, performance or state of emotion. This usage is adapted from canon, notably episode 7x08, '*South Park* is Gay!' (*Sound Park* 2003), where gay refers to the fad of metrosexuality sweeping the town in the wake of the popular TV show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.* 'That's so gay' is routinely used an insult for more or less anything, and indeed, episode 13x12, 'The F-word' (*Sound Park* 2009) openly debated whether it is acceptable to use 'fag' as a general all-purpose insult, given that the town's young people who employed did not consider themselves remotely homophobic, and were

in fact aiming it a particularly obnoxious gang of ultra-masculinist Harley Davison bikers.

The primary meaning towards which the signifier 'gay' is pulled is something like 'feminine' or 'sensitive'. Stan exclaims in *I Feel So* that he is not about to 'learn how to strip like a girl' for the benefit of his of heterosexual girlfriend, on the grounds that it would be 'totally gay' (Brat-Child3 2006a). In *Journal,* Seaouryou has Kenny reflect:

> Right now everyone is busy working on their entries for the Arts and Other Arts Festival the school is holding. It's pretty much going to be a celebration of gayness. (2006a)

This construction of gayness as emotional state or action, as opposed to an identity category, is carried over into reviews. Reviewer YoukaiAnjiru (2008) says of *I Feel So,* 'I don't think I've read a story in a _while_ that's invoked so much emotion from me;w; /gay'. The emoticon connotes a crying face, and the forward slash in web diction enacts the *turning off* of a command function, as /i for italics. YoukaiAnjiru enacts a performance of 'gayness' which literally denotes the expression of empathy and emotion. The term 'gay' also refers to affection or friendship displayed between men. In *Journal*, Kenny observes of Kyle and Stan, 'Those two are so pathetically gay. Except for the whole fucking other dudes aspect. I don't know how such gayness got wasted on straight guys' (Seaouryou 2006a). This is an interesting quotation, demonstrating the discursive struggle between 'gay' as indicating a sexual identity and 'gay' as emotional state or performance. Sometimes the discursive struggle is exploited for comedic effect, as in *Psychic BS*, Cartman maintains that the only sure way to avoid 'gayness' is by hating everyone of the same gender:

> 'Butters … gay. Butter's … gay.' He motioned his hands up and down as if he were a balancing weight. 'Guys don't like other guys unless they're gay.'
>
> Butters scowled. 'That isn't true. If it were … well, then Stan and Kyle and- and Kenny would be too, 'cause they all like each other.'
>
> Eric scoffed. 'They're all fags, Butters. It's so obvious. Just look at me. I'm not and you can tell because I hate those guys.'
>
> Butters fiddled with the zipper of his jacket. 'Wow, I never knew I was gay'. (Brat-Child3 2006b)

Yet pulling against this disconnect is the construction of sexuality as a more essential and physical identity. In *Aisle 10*, Craig reflects on his dawning same-sex crush:

> Let me be the first t completely and confidently straight (if not borderline asexual), and then wake up the next morning, not more than twenty-four or so hours later, and not be so sure of that anymore. It's like reaching the border between two states, stepping out of the car, and actually taking a physical step across it. One second ago you were in a completely different state, and now one second into the future, you're in a different one. Just. Like. That. Except, well, what I was going through was not quite as premeditated as that. (Qindarka 2010)

Homosexuality is here constructed as a 'completely different state' than heterosexuality, albeit one might enter and leave. These constructions are less frequent.

Far more common, and thus making more discursive impacts, are statements asserting that being attracted to one particular person of the same gender has no bearing on sexual identity. They appear across the range of stories, including *Aisle 10*:

> Naked dudes in the locker room don't do anything for me … It's just Stan (Brat-Child3 2006a)
>
> I don't know if you would even classify me as gay or straight, I really only, well, don't hate just one person that just so happens to be a guy (Qindarka 2010)
>
> Are you … gay?' [asked Craig's mother].
>
> 'I don't know, mom' […] 'But this kid is pretty cool'. (xichxliebexdichx 2009)

And indeed, by far the most common construction of sexuality is fluid, amorphous, changeable and not particularly crucial to identity construction. Gay/straight does not seem to be an us/other axis along which political identity is defined. Some critics have praised *South Park* in reserved terms for similar constructions. Gardiner (2005) has called it 'Queer Lite': 'polymorphously perverse' and 'ambiguously gay affirmative' (51). This seems quite reasonably accurate summation of the meanings derived and created in the fans' writing, except that, as illustrated above, the label 'gay' is rather shied from.

Two key statements make strong interventions in this discursive struggle. *Psychic BS* and *The Adventures of Taco Man and Robo Inferno* produce new terms, which are repeated in the texts and then affirmed and approved by reviewers. In *Psychic BS*, Kenny asserts that the reason he is frequently 'trying to screw dudes' is not because he is gay, but 'genderly tolerant'. Kyle calls this an 'excuse', but later utilizes it to help Stan through a sexual identity crisis:

> 'I don't w-want to be g-gay.' [Stan] stammered through tears. Kyle laughed sadly, holding back his own water works.
>
> 'You're not gay, you're just … genderly tolerant.' He smiled at remembering Kenny's words. Stan's crying began to calm, settling into hiccupy sniffles.
>
> 'I-I'm what?'
>
> 'Genderly tolerant,' Kyle repeated. 'Kenny's words, not mine.'
>
> Stan allowed this new phrase [to] sink in, then laughed through the few lingering tears. (Brat-Child3 2006b)

The term is repeated in reviews and has actually been picked up and utilized in other *South Park* fic, extending the meaning of that 'polymorphous perversity' critics have attributed to *South Park* and increasing its impact on the discursive formation. It is interesting that Kyle has to use it to console Stan, to assure him he is not gay merely for acting on same-sex attraction. Again, the identifier is shied away from in favour of a more fluid construction: 'gay' is not a desirable identity. In *The Adventures of Taco Man*, Clyde grapples explicitly with language:

> I'd feel so … unfree. If that's a word. If I could only like girls, I'd feel unfree.
>
> 'I'm not gay,' I said. 'But I could be like, half-gay.'

> ‘So, you’re bisexual,’ Kevin said. And it wasn’t like a, ‘so, you’re bisexual?’ No, it was a statement.
>
> He dubbed me bisexual, it would seem.
>
> ‘Is that the word?’ I said […]. Everything is confusing. I don’t like words. I can’t remember half the words I’m supposed to. [If I had a dictionary], peoplesexual would be a word. Just in case I eliminate (whatever that means) the definition of ‘gender’. (damn expensive eggs 2010)

It is interesting that, in planning his own ‘Clydictionary’, Clyde here grants himself the power to ‘eliminate […] the definition of “gender”’ in the same way that, via writing, the writing of young fans struggles to fix the meanings of ‘gay’; ‘bisexual’; and, as will later be seen, explicitly gendered terms.

Education

School in *South Park* is depicted as an absurd institution, pointless at best and dangerous at worst. The children receive counter-factual lessons mixing history, popular TV shows and the vehement yet changeable biases of their unstable teacher Mr Garrison, with his assistants Mr Hand (a sock puppet) and Mr Slave (a leather-clad BDSM submissive). Mr Garrison frequently insults his students, and is inclined to outrageous assertions like ‘there are no stupid questions, just stupid people’ (‘Starvin Marvin’, *Sound Park* 1997b) and ‘genetic engineering is a way to fix God’s horrible mistakes, like German people’ (‘An Elephant Makes Love to a Pig’, *South Park* 1997a). A strong set of statements in the fanfic continue the construction of negative construction of school and teachers:

> ‘Hold on,’ Kyle said. ‘You want me to write a paper on how Hitler was good?’ Mr. Dorcas adjusted his square glasses. They tended to mislead his students into thinking he was weak or just, or anything but a sadistic sociopath. (Seaouryou 2006b)

Teachers abuse their position to impose their views on students or inflict sadistic punishments, and it is notable how many reviewers consider this not only a valid interpretation of *South Park*, but a valid interpretation of their real experience:

> You really made it seem realistic (lemme guess, you based Mr. Dorcas on your past/previous teacher. My friends and I always seem to do that XDD). (CjMlUvR-01 2006)
> The history teacher totally reminds me of my math teacher. (Hinata Inuzuka xx 2006)

This is not a passive acceptance of an inherent meaning embedded in *South Park,* but a consideration and relation of meaning to teenagers’ own negative experience of school. Student identity is constructed as subordinate to and abused by the bad Other of educational authority. There are many reviews and author’s notes validating TV fandom and fanfic writing as a better educational network than traditional institutions (c.f. Black 2008):

> I’ve learned more about how to write stories from yours than any other teacher could teach me. (Just a Guest 2014)
>
> [This] has inspired me to write better as well. To be truthful, it’s been my savior for two weeks now. When I sat in the same chair at school for eight hours infront of a pixilated

> program on the computer encouraging me to 'learn' the most boring of things- it was this fanfic that I snuck in on the web to read. (Kriss 2008)

There are multiple comments and notes indicating that stories were written largely in school, and that reviewers read them in class time. Foodstamp (2008) admits that *Lex Talionis* – which, it should be noted, is far more accomplished in a traditional literary sense than anything required by curriculum – was primarily written in class. A reviewer responds: 'writing in class is always way more fun than writing at home […] I got through three times as many math books as anyone else in my class for that reason' (Lar Lar 2008). In the face of boring lessons, teachers perceived as sadistic, and educational programmes deemed irrelevant, popular culture and reading and writing material is smuggled into the institutional space. There is some pull against this construction of school: the institutions constructed in fic are bad, but generally less outrageously terrible than the school in *South Park*. In *Aisle 10*, Kevin admits that he did 'appreciate the schedule it forced me into. The whole going to bed/waking up/eating proper meals/increasing my knowledge thing. I probably wouldn't be very productive without it telling me what to do every day' (Qindarka 2010). There are also reviews expressing regret for spending too much school or homework time reading fic, thus constructing school as necessary. Overall, though, the construction of informal learning as inferior to institutional prevails (cf. Rennie 2008).

Gender

The final discursive node of note is gender. Fanfiction is perceived as primarily a female activity (Bacon-Smith 1992, Cumberland 2000; Busse 2005), and whilst several commenters identified as male, their statements tended to position both themselves and the male *South Park* characters as opposed to the majority of users (see below). The fics themselves tend to take maleness as a silent default, juxtaposing it with admissions like:

> I didn't think it would be asking too much for him to have developed just a little respect for my feelings. God, I sound like such a fucking chick right now […] This is gonna make me sound like such a woman, but this vacation was really good for our relationship. (DanniDinmont 2008)

Sensitivity and relationship work is the property of women – though the male characters are expressing it – so silence and emotional suppression default to a male norm. Yet when maleness is mentioned, similarly to sexuality, it is detachable from bodies and attributable to actions:

> 'No one's bleeding to death! And even if they were, they ought to take it like a man!' [said the P.E. teacher].
>
> 'Even the girls?' someone muttered.
>
> 'Especially the girls, Bebe!'. (Searouryou 2006b)

Though these might seem like stereotypical, even retrograde constructions of maleness, the interesting point is that maleness is detached from gendered bodies. Here, though the mode is comic, the performance of maleness is constructed as available to everyone – especially the girls! Boys meanwhile are frequently shown to fail at it. In *Journal*, Kenny notes that Clyde is '*hardly* a guy', due to his propensity for crying at war documentaries

in history class (Seaouryou 2006a). Apparently there are degrees of gender, just as there are degrees of 'gayness' (cf. 'so gay'; 'such gayness'). Bodies are not the basis of gender identity. This detachment of gender from bodies and attachment of it to performance continues into the reviews. Actions attributed to maleness tend to be visceral, physical, sexual and juvenile:

> The brain freeze contest [in *I Feel So]*, and the filling condoms with stuff to use as weapons, was totally guy behavior (Bishop 2007a)
>
> The baby oil flashback scene was hot and very realistic for young males. Oh, and the meat of the story with Kyle covering for Stan? -That- was very good too […] You do very good at this boy stuff (Donny 2007)

Yet this state of maleness is extremely tenuous, and the characters are judged to flit in and out of it:

> Stan and Kyle are also still boys-except for maybe when Stan touched Kyle's knee-so that was great too […] Kyle having flushed cheeks was girly (Bishop 2007b)
>
> It drives me crazy to see the characters reduced to girls who happen to possess male parts. (TDtheMagicMan 2007)

Notice how the final comment here explicitly separates gender from bodies and relegates it entirely to performativity. Pulling against this is the construction of maleness as an absolute identity, one which, when properly accomplished, even feminine performativity does not jeapordize. Donald Bishop's final comment on *I Feel So* commends the author:

> Even though I know you're a girl, I don't believe that I'm reading male characters that were written by a female author. I've read books like that and you can tell the differences easily […] Even right up to the last chapter when you get into the mushy couple stuff, the characters STILL don't lose their manhood. (2007c)

Manhood of course has a double meaning, re-associating gender and body: elsewhere, a dissident reviewer criticizes that Kyle is constructed as 'unmanly' in this story and 'barely had any balls' (PoodlesandNoodles 2008). Overall, though, the disconnection of gender from bodies dominates the node, just as the disconnection of 'gayness' from sexuality dominated the second.

Conclusions

It is evident that whilst academic critics have defended *South Park* from conservative guardians of popular culture in terms of its content, their interpretations are limited by an essentialist model of meaning. Rather than attending to what young fans *make of and from* the text, they have attempted to impose range of narrowly political meanings onto it, or otherwise condemn it for lacking them. Conversely, young fans engagement is not political at all in the sense of a left-right spectrum of allegiance to party policies. This does not make that engagement cynical. It is clearly engaged with and constructive of 'the political' in Mouffe's sense, interpreting and constructing identities, constructing and critiquing power relations between individuals, social structures, and institutions. The struggle over identity particularly evident around the meanings of sexuality and gender

roles, understandably a focus of interest for young people. Whilst some of the properties attributed to terms like 'gay' and 'male' might seem stereotypical, what is particularly interesting here is their detachment from bodies and the strong discursive pull towards performativity, constructing fluid meanings of sexuality and gender more relevant to the identity politics of young people than essentialist categorization. Contrary to academic assertions that the text inculcates cynicism (Groening 2008), strong empathy is expressed for the characters, and moral/ethical judgements offered. In fanfiction, we find a wealth of evident for Mendes, Carter, and Davies's (2010) argument that the division between entertainment and politics is a false one, and assertions from adults and educators that young people are disaffected relies on false binaries and a narrow definition of politics.

The power relations posited between student identity and educational institutions are also worthy of note. Jenkins and Black have previously argued for the educational potential of fanfic, and here we have a demonstration of how young people experience it as an education in literacy, more fun, more relevant and more effective than their institutionalized education. A final and related point to make here is that whilst it may seem obvious to academics in media and cultural studies that meaning is not confined and inherent in the text in some essentialist determinist model, these insight are apparently not breaching disciplinary boundaries as much as we might hope. Before pronouncing the effect of media on young fans, it should be our academic and ethical responsibility to ask what young fans are doing with media. One task for fan studies and popular culture studies in the future must be to bring this kind of work to other fields in the humanities, demonstrating the very active and productive meaning making activities of audiences.

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Note

1. The character is actually Black, and his name is, of course, a reference to the inclusion of a 'token Black' character in American fiction.

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